

See all Style



How to master the art of opening a champagne bottle with a sword - just like Cameron Diaz

Clinking glasses of champagne is a must this year - but not before a ceremonial sabrage, compliments of Cameron Diaz

By Hilary Armstrong
21 December 2020 • 7:00am



"Voilà!" says a joyful Cameron Diaz to her 7.6m Instagram followers after slicing the top clean off a bottle of sparkling wine with a kitchen knife. "It's always good to know a fun party trick!" she adds. "Even if there are no parties happening!"

Wise words. For this party season, with 69 percent of the English population in Tier 3, our Christmas and New Year's festivities may need a little jollying along. Which is why Diaz's nifty trick, sabrage - the art of opening a bottle of champagne with a sabre - may be just the skill you need right now.

Sabrage goes back well beyond Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle (Diaz's first on-screen sabrage) to the Napoleonic wars of the early 1800s, when the swaggering French hussars would open champagne bottles with a swipe of their sabres to celebrate victory. Today, the skill is practised by champagne lovers as diverse as the traditionally-minded members of the Confrérie du Sabre d'Or and the swashbuckling socialites who knock the tops off their DP with iPhones and post the evidence on TikTok.

Julian White, ambassador emeritus of the Confrérie du Sabre d'Or's UK chapter, enjoys both the fun and the formality of ceremonial sabrage. "The object of the Confrérie [established 1986] was to revive the old Napoleonic tradition of sabraging champagne which had gone into abeyance largely due to the fact the cavalry were no longer on horses but sitting in armoured cars and tanks."

The Confrérie's officials, clad in green cloaks and cocked hats, practise their art at 'caveaux de sabrage' (such as at the Ritz and the Stafford in London) and private events where novices can do their maiden sabrage. "We like people to do it properly" and, by extension, safely (to which end, all their maître-sabreurs are insured). "There are some fairly hideous YouTube videos where people have hacked bottles to bits, particularly on New Year's Eve when they're getting slightly pissed."

There has been an explosion of interest in sabrage in recent years. The trend took off with Instagram, gaining momentum during lockdown when the party set found themselves stuck at home. "The same way everybody was doing sourdough, making pizza, people were sabraging to beat the boredom," says chef and sabrage-enthusiast Andrea Zagatti. "It's something that feels dangerous." He relishes the showmanship, the chance to turn something special - drinking champagne - into something even more special.

"It's one thing a lot of people have on their bucket list of things to try," says Ethan Boroian, UK Champagne Ambassador, Moët Hennessey UK. "With social media, people are seeing more and more people do it and nine times out of ten, they're not doing it with sabres but with a butter knife or a credit card or a phone." While they don't often do sabrage at the maisons for health and safety reasons, he has observed a growing interest at events, particularly as socialising has moved outdoors. It ties in too with the lockdown trend for enhanced home drinking experiences. "That could be with sabrage, better glassware, experimenting with food pairings. People are saying 'let's mix it up a bit.'"



Sabrage has become growing interest at events, particularly as socialising has moved outdoors | CREDIT: Getty Images

The social media sabreur's preferred pour is Dom Pérignon. Boroian likens sabraging the wine to taking a Porsche on a racing track; it's taking it to the next level. "It's more of a flex, as the kids say." He advises honing one's technique on an inexpensive bottle, a non or recent vintage. "I tend to be more careful with the older vintages just because they're a little more delicate and we should respect them." Cava, prosecco and English fizz will all work.

Sabrage is easy once you know how. "It's about the precision, not about the force," says Boroian. Some safety points: always do it in an open space; don't shake it; and don't ever drink from the bottle. The bottle must be ice cold, around 3°C (a domestic refrigerator is around 5°C: to chill the neck further, you can upend the bottle in an ice bucket). Choose your weapon: the blunt side of a knife will do, though Georg Jensen's stainless steel sabre cuts a dash.

To begin, remove both foil and cage, then, holding the bottle at an angle of 20 to 30 degrees, run the knife upwards along the seam with a smooth, flowing backhand motion to the exact point where seam and annulus (the collar at the top) intersect. This is the bottle's weakest point. The six bars of atmospheric pressure inside the bottle will propel the cork off taking any shards of glass with it (it's advisable to allow a small flow to wash away any loose shards and check the first glass poured). Et Voilà!

Whatever you do, do it carefully. Nobody wants to start 2021 with a #sabragefail.

Sign up for the [Telegraph Luxury newsletter](#) for your weekly dose of exquisite taste and expert opinion.

Luxury newsletter

Your weekly dose of expert opinion and exquisite taste, dedicated to the finer things in life.



Sign up

